

At Least One Early Automobile Manufactured in Fairbury

By: Dale C. Maley
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Joseph Jesse Slagel (1883-1915) was born south of Fairbury. He had a natural mechanical knack as a young man. Joseph opened a machine shop at the northwest corner of Sixth and Locust Streets around 1906. He manufactured and sold small internal combustion engines called hit and miss engines. They were called hit and miss engines because the sound they make is very distinctive. This distinctive sound is "POP whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh POP" as the engine fires and then coasts until the speed decreases, and it fires again to maintain its average speed. These small engines were usually used to power water pumps on farms before electricity was available.

Unfortunately, in 1913 Joseph Slagel started to experience serious health issues. He sold his Fairbury machine shop and moved to New Mexico in 1914. Many early cars used acetylene gas at high pressure to power the headlights. This system was called the Prestolite tank and generator. Joseph owned such a vehicle in New Mexico. In 1915, at the age of 32, Joseph was killed when this pressurized gas system blew up his car. Because these acetylene systems were so dangerous, they were replaced in a few years by electric lights.

At this time, it is unknown how many Midget hit and miss engines Joseph Slagel produced at his Fairbury Motor Works. There are five of his engines still in existence. Two are in Fairbury, one is in Strawn, one is in Indiana, and an Iowa collector owns one.

Initial research into Joseph J. Slagel's life found some indications that he also had aspirations of manufacturing automobiles in Fairbury. A July 1907 Blade article recounted that Joseph Slagel was expanding his machine shop so he could start manufacturing cars.

About one year later, in June of 1908, the Blade published a story about the progress of Joe Slagel building his first automobile. The article was titled Fairbury Motor Car Works. The article reported that Joe Slagel might be starting the biggest business ever attempted in Fairbury. The Blade story recounted that Joseph had decided to manufacture a motor car that would meet the requirements of the ordinary individual that could be sold at a low price.

The Blade article reported that Joseph had his car patterns finished, and he expected to have his first car completed by the middle of July. The vehicle was to be operated by a two-cylinder vertical eight horse engine, double friction drive. It would have 36-inch wheels and solid tires with a single seat. It would be staunchly built and able to travel over all kinds of roads. Mr. Slagel hoped to be able to put his car on the market for \$400 and believed he would be able to do this and reserve a fair profit. The Blade reporter

predicted success for Joseph Slagel because, at that time, there were no low-cost automobiles for the common working man.

Also, in 1908, Joseph Slagel was interviewed for a biography that would appear in Volume II of the 1909 Livingston County history book. The introduction to his biography recounted that we had moved to the "horseless age." His bio also predicted the adoption of automobiles as soon as a light vehicle with sufficient power could be invented. Although not explicitly stated in his biography, it was apparent Joseph Slagel was involved in creating and manufacturing an automobile.

Joseph Slagel placed ads in automotive trade magazines in 1909 and 1913 using the company name of Fairbury Motor Car Works. He also put an ad in the 1911 Livingston County Atlas using the name of his automotive company.

Extensive historical research in 2018 could not validate that Joseph Slagel ever actually manufactured and sold an automobile from his Fairbury Motor Car Works. In 2020, a historic 1909 book was discovered. This book was titled List of Automobile Licenses Issued by James A. Rose, the Secretary of the State of Illinois. The book lists all license plates issued to Illinois residents in the years 1907, 1908, and 1909. This book reported that only 10 Fairbury residents were issued a license plate in 1907. In 1908, another 16 Illinois license plates were issued to Fairbury citizens.

In 1908, William A. B. Smith received Illinois License Plate number 12616 for his automobile manufactured by the Fairbury Motor Car Works. William A. B. Smith (1876-1917) was born in Fairbury. He lived on East Oak Street and was married with two children. He carried the mail the last 13 years of his life on the rural Route Three.

Even today, a rural mail carrier's vehicle endures a daily endurance test of starting and stopping. These vehicles often prematurely wear out brakes and tires. In 1908, a mail carrier's car would be a perfect low-budget "proving grounds" for the manufacturer of a new automobile.

It is theorized that Joseph Slagel and William A.B. Smith worked out a deal. Joseph sold the car to William at a relatively low price a mail carrier could afford. In return, Joseph got an economical method of proving his car design.

Joseph Slagel was a young man with a great deal of promise. It was regrettable that he only lived to be 32 years of age. History buffs will continue to monitor new information as it is discovered, which would further validate that Joseph manufactured automobiles in Fairbury.

Joseph Slagel, - - Manager

The Fairbury Motor Car Works

OFFICE AND FACTORY
Cor. Main and 6th Sts.

Fairbury

Illinois

Fairbury Motor Works Advertisement in 1911 Livingston County
Atlas